Train the politicians first

Recent proposals for parenting intervention smack of short-term political gimmicks, say Andrew Leigh and Justin Wolfers.

When they revisited the children 15 years later, the researchers found that the intervention had been successful. Those whose parents had received home visits had lower rates of substance abuse, fewer behavioural problems, and were less likely to have been in trouble with the law.

Because the families also had lower rates of welfare usage, the researchers calculated that the program more than paid for itself.

So parenting programs work, right?

Not so fast. According to the Elmira research team, which warns: "There is considerable enthusiasm these days about the promise of early preventive intervention programs that current evidence, unfortunately, cannot support. Public hope and confidence in the promise of such programs is a scarce commodity that we dare not squander on approaches that are not likely to work."

Thanks to careful studies in the social sciences, we are beginning to understand what forms of assistance are likely to help at-risk families. If the Howard Government wants to get serious about parenting programs, it’s time it started looking at the research.

Andrew Leigh is a PhD student at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Dr Wolfers is an Assistant Professor at Stanford Business School.